

## **Just a Girl**

by Brenda S. Cox

Halima and her younger brother Ahmad scratched in the dirt with sticks. The tall houses of their Yemeni village blended into the mountainside. White-rimmed windows stared past the children down a giant staircase of terraced fields.

Ahmad wrote carefully in the sand: “Baa, Alif, Baa: bab.” Nine-year-old Halima tried to copy the Arabic word for “door”. When Ahmad laughed at her squiggly letters, she traced them again.

“There!” she shouted. “I wrote it.”

“Well,” said Ahmad, “it’s not bad for a girl.”

“I could write as well as you if Father would let me go to school,” retorted Halima. She hiked up the embroidered pants under her purple dress.

“School! But you’re just a girl. No girls from our village have ever gone to school. You have to stay home to help Mother. Anyway, a girl would get tired walking so far.”

“I could do it.”

“You’d get lost in the town. It’s huge! There are a boys’ school, a girls’ school, a hospital, a mosque, and at least 20 shops.”

Halima sighed. She twisted the material of her dress around her finger. “If only I could go to school and learn to read. There are so many things I want to know. Will you tell me everything you learn?”

“Maybe later,” Ahmad said. “I’m going to play soccer with Ali now. Bye!”

Halima scooped up her baby brother, who was gurgling as he dug in the sand and returned to the house. Somehow, someday, she’d prove she wasn’t “just a girl”!

The next morning Halima’s mother announced, “Your father and I are going to my parents’ village today with your cousins. Do the housework, and keep baby Yahya out of trouble.”

“I’ll be careful, Mama,” Halima promised.

When everyone had gone, Halima did her morning chores. She swept the floors and cleaned and arranged the mafraj cushions. She fed the cow, sheep, and chickens. She gathered eggs and brought in firewood.

After baking bread for lunch, Halima went down the hill to fetch water. She balanced the water jar on her head, picked up Yahya, and made her way up to the house without spilling a drop. At the front door, she sat down to rest. Thankful for his freedom, Yahya crawled off to explore the rocks nearby. Suddenly he began screaming. Halima caught

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her breath. A big brown scorpion was on Yahya's arm. Swallowing her fear, Halima brushed off the ugly creature and smashed it with a rock.



She picked up the baby and tried to comfort him, but it was no use. He screamed louder with pain. She could see the tiny stinger in his arm. Halima tried to pull it out, but the stinger only went in deeper.

What could she do? Last year a baby in her village had died of a scorpion sting!

All her relatives had left in the village's only car. Her brothers were at school. She would have to take the baby to the doctor herself. How would her parents know where she had gone?

Halima picked up the stick she used for "lessons" with Ahmad. In the dirt she drew pictures of a baby and a scorpion with its tail pointing toward the baby. How could she show the town? The closest mosque was in town; that would be easy to draw. In Ahmad's book she had seen one with a tower called a minaret for calling people to prayer. She drew a minaret, hoping her parents would understand this message.

The doctor might need to see the scorpion. Shuddering, she wrapped the dead scorpion in a cloth and tied it to the sash of her dress.

She carried her crying brother back down the step path. As she passed the water tank, she floundered over stones. Thorns caught at her pants and scratched her sandaled feet. Finally, she reached the paved road to town. She raced along it until she was almost exhausted. Yahya, whimpering now, felt heavier and heavier.

She hurried on and on until she noticed a white building. Halima squinted at the sign. Surely it was a word her brother had taught her. Yes, it was "mustashfa", "hospital"! Thankfully, Halima stumbled through the door.

Late that evening, Halima's father found his daughter nearly asleep by Yahya's hospital bed.

"She's a brave girl and intelligent too," Halima heard the doctor whisper to her father. "She even brought the scorpion so we knew exactly how to treat the baby. It was a serious sting. The little boy might have died if she hadn't brought him here so quickly."

Her father watched Halima and his son for a while. At last he said, "I saw your message and came right away. Halima, I'm proud of you. You'll be a good mother someday."

"I knew how to find the hospital because Ahmad taught me to read the word."

"Is that right? Well, maybe a little learning wouldn't hurt you, even if you are just a girl. Do you still want to go to that school?"

"Oh, father!" Halima said, flinging her arms around him.

Soon Halima was the happiest, hardest-working girl in first grade.

**Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5**  
**LA.E.1.2.2 Plot/Conflict Form B**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Read the passage “Just A Girl”, then circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. What does Halima do to help solve Yahya’s problem?
  - A. Halima takes Yahya to the hospital.
  - B. Halima draws pictures in the dirt.
  - C. Halima flounders over stones and thorns to reach the road.
  - D. Halima sleeps by her brother’s hospital bed.
  
2. Halima brought the scorpion with her to the hospital so
  - A. she could prove her intelligence to her father.
  - B. the doctors would know how to treat the baby.
  - C. she could show the doctors that she had killed it.
  - D. the doctors could remove the rest of the stinger.
  
3. What is Halima’s BIGGEST problem at the beginning of the story?
  - A. She can only write squiggly letters.
  - B. She wants to go to school.
  - C. She has too many chores.
  - D. She has to watch her baby brother.
  
4. What is the FIRST event in the story that tells the reader that Halima wants to learn how to read and write?
  - A. She asks Ahmad to teach her everything he learns.
  - B. She tells Ahmad there are many things she wants to know.
  - C. She gets upset when Ahmad laughs at her letters.
  - D. She tries and tries to copy Ahmad’s letters in the sand.
  
5. Halima draws in the sand after Yahya gets stung because she wants
  - A. to show how smart she is.
  - B. to practice her letters.
  - C. to leave her parents a message.
  - D. to do lessons with her brother.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5</b> <b>LA.E.1.2.2 Plot/Conflict Form B</b></p>
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**Answer Key – Just a Girl**

LA.E.1.2.2: The student identifies plot development or conflict resolution in a story and/or identifies how story events contribute to the plot development or conflict resolution. The student also makes simple inferences or draws conclusions regarding story elements.

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